

Building Bridges

Linking foster and biological parents for the sake of the child

By Colin W. Morris

When foster parents decide to care for a child, it's often impossible to know all of the facts about the child's history. The experiences of foster children are complicated, and, especially when domestic violence has or is occurring—it can be tough for a foster parent to know how to handle it with their new child. For foster parents, reaching out to a biological parent can sometimes provide a window into the child's past, as well as their future.

Communication between all involved improves a child's chance for positive, healthy development.

Clarisse,* a foster parent for almost twenty years, reminds all parents that there is a support system in place for them. "There are a lot of people around that want to help," she says. "We can all be an extended family."

Let's face it: Everyone involved in the foster care system needs support. Communication between all involved—foster parents, children, case workers, and biological parents—improves a child's chance for positive, healthy development. But it's not always easy. It can be especially hard for a foster parent to build a relationship with a child's biological parent because reaching out is a very sensitive matter. It raises many issues—some of which leave biological parents feeling uncomfortable.



Nevertheless, building a relationship can prove essential for a child's overall well-being. Many children react positively to their biological parents and foster parents working together, whether it's towards reunification or just to mend a damaged, difficult situation.

When it comes to establishing trust between foster and biological parents, Clarisse suggests being honest with the parents and to avoid judgment. "Open up about yourself. Confide in them. Let them know what your role is," Clarisse says. "Let them know that you're open to whatever they need to share."

Putting the biological parent at ease can open a lot of doors. Janice,* a foster parent who has cared for teenage mothers, stresses that making time for a biological parent has benefits. "I think when you sit down face to face with them in a room, and you realize that they're a real person and a real human being, it just changes the dynamic."

Sometimes during visits, Janice noticed that the biological mom was still being abused, and Clarisse describes a situation where she encountered an abusive dad. "During the times the biological father would accompany the mother on supervised visits, the mother seemed closed and wouldn't speak much with her child," Clarisse remembers. "When he wasn't at the visit the mom would communicate with me—it would be a

very nice visit for her and the baby," she explains. "But when he came she wouldn't even look at me. She was afraid."

It's important that foster parents—already in challenging positions—see the value of reaching out and addressing issues of abuse. If abuse is present, the biological parents may not be able to reunite with their child.

It's crucial that foster parents are aware of the services available for domestic violence victims and feel comfortable referring a mother to such services.

Tips for Foster Parents:

- For your safety and that of the victim, talk to her one-on-one, away from the child, and always away from the abusive parent.
- A simple way to raise the issue is to say: "I am worried about you. If you need someone to talk to, you owe it to yourself to call the domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). They can provide you with local resources that can help."
- Let her know that the violence is not her fault and that she's not alone.

Foster parents are in a unique position to not only show biological parents ways that they can work together on behalf of children, but to ultimately keep everyone safe.

* Name changed

Foster Fathers



TALKING WITH BOYS

Your son, grandson, nephew, foster son, younger brother—all the boys in your life need your time, energy, and advice to help them grow into healthy young men. Boys are swamped with messages from TV, friends, school, the neighborhood, online, music, and movies. Everything they see and hear tells them what it means to "be a man." Boys need your advice on how to behave toward girls. Boys are also watching how you and other men relate to women to figure out their own stance towards girls. Through your guidance, they'll learn that real men respect women and that violence never equals strength.

Visit www.endabuse.org for specific tips on talking to boys.

Resources:

National Domestic Violence Hotline:
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

National Foster Parents Association

Provides support to foster parents in achieving safety, permanence and well-being for the children and youth in their care.

www.nfpainc.com

(253) 853-4000 or (800) 557-5238

FosterParentNet

A web site devoted entirely to providing foster parents with resources, education, training, support groups, and online discussion groups to help them in their role as foster parents.

www.fosterparentnet.org

Recommended Reading:

When Love Goes Wrong: What to Do When You Can't Do Anything Right
by Anne Jones & Susan Schechter

In Love and In Danger: A Teen's Guide to Breaking Free of Abusive Relationships
by Barrie Levy

**Para leer Connect en español,
por favor visite: www.nomasabusos.org**

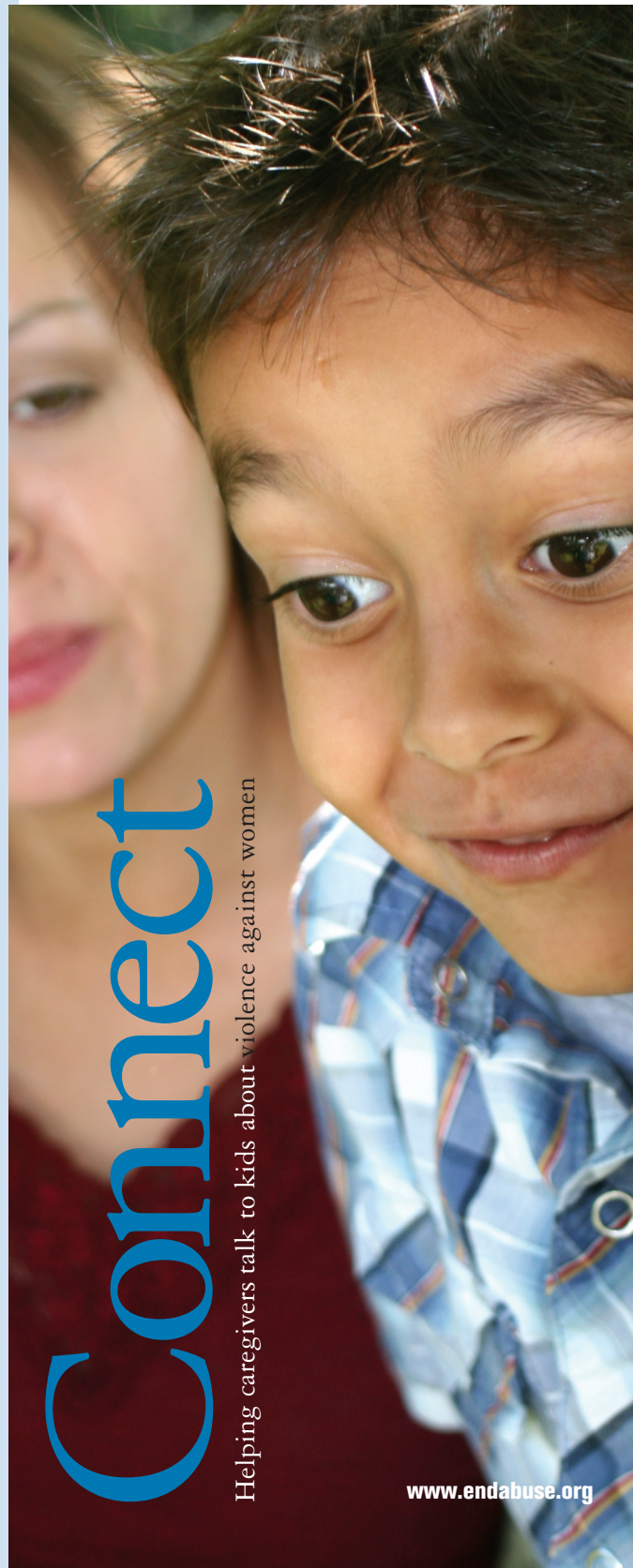
Family Violence Prevention Fund

Visit www.endabuse.org

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Parent2Parent



Dear P2P,

My fifteen-year-old foster daughter tells me that her boyfriend “allows” her to eat lunch only with him, and not with any other friends. He also threatens any boy that he thinks is flirting with her. While I think my foster daughter actually seems flattered by her boyfriend’s jealousy, these stories worry me. I know that her biological father was extremely controlling and sometimes violent with her mother. I don’t want her to think that’s the right way for men to treat women. What should I do?
– Worried Foster Mom

Dear WFM,

Well, the good news (and I had to work a bit to find it because this young man’s behavior really worries me, too) is that your foster daughter is telling you the anecdotes. So nice work in providing a trusting environment wherein she knows the door is open to talk about her life. Now the tricky part is keeping it open and continuing to build on your relationship with her. Start by making sure you’re reading the situation right. Ask your foster daughter directly how she feels about her boyfriend’s behavior and really listen to what she is saying without passing judgment. If she does in fact think his behavior is cool (e.g., proof of his love), be candid with your disapproval. If she admits to having concerns, or being

scared, agree with her and comfort her anxiety about the situation. Remind her that you are there to keep her safe, and that you care about her wellbeing. If it is appropriate, encourage her to invite her boyfriend and other friends over to your house for dinner. This will make her feel welcome and will allow you a chance to get to know who she is spending time with.

Either way, you’ll want to convey your feelings clearly about what

you think constitutes a healthy relationship and remember that you are a role model for her. Talk to her about how awful it feels when someone controls and threatens you and reinforce the importance of mutual respect in all relationships. Given you know that her biological father was abusive towards her mother, try to approach the conversation without criticizing her boyfriend as this may shut the door to future communication. Express that no one deserves to be physically or emotionally hurt by someone. Also, consider suggesting that you could help her explore some counseling/trauma therapy options to help her deal with the experiences she had growing up with violence and how this could affect her as a young woman in dating relationships.

Also tell her that friendship is important at any age, and no boyfriend should try to cut her off from friends—male or female. Such restrictions can lead to loneliness and isolation and even, danger. Also emphasize that his threatening another boy certainly isn’t cool; it’s a sign of potential violence. Even if she secretly agrees with you, be forewarned that your foster daughter may not openly appreciate your opinion or be ready to break off her relationship just yet. But, checking in every few days will show her you’re paying close attention and that you really care about how she feels. Finally, remember that dating violence can be invisible. Trust your intuition. Sometimes that’s all we have to go on.

– P2P

www.endabuse.org